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REPORT OF THE COURT-MARTIAL FOR THE TRIAL
OF THE HESSIAN OFFICERS CAPTURED
BY WASHINGTON AT TRENTON,
DECEMBER 26, 1776.

TRANSLATED FROM A GERMAN COPY COMMUNICATED BY FREDERICK KAPP.

[In the spring of 1782 a court-martial was held at Cassel for the trial of the officers who were captured by General Washington's army at the surprise at Trenton, December 26, 1776. This body of Hessian officers consisted of Lieutenant-Colonel Bretthauer, Major Malthus, Captain Brubach, and four subaltern officers of Rall's regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel Scheffer, Major von Hanstein, Captain Steding and eight subaltern officers of the Lossberg regiment, Captain von Biesenrodt and seven officers of the Knyphausen regiment, and Lieutenant Fischer of the artillery. It will be seen that the blame was all thrown upon Colonel Rall, the commanding officer, and Major von Dechow, a field officer of the Knyphausen regiment, both of whom were wounded, and died in the village of Trenton. It does not appear that General Sir William Howe, who ordered the long chain of weak cantonments through Jersey, was spoken of at the court-martial as in any way responsible for the defeat of the Hessian contingent. Five years after the surrender it was quite easy for the German War Commission to report the misfortune as due to the two officers who lay in bloody graves in the quiet churchyard on the Delaware.—WILLIAM S. STRYKER.]

SERENE HIGHNESS!

Most gracious Prince and Lord!

The War Commission graciously confirms the complete acquittal by the court-martial of the surviving officers of the Trenton surprise, deferentially agreeing with the court that its sentence should be published in the Gazettes, and also that free permission to carry new colors should be granted, such being, though not requisite to the sentence, in accordance therewith; and moreover, both in reference to errors in the trial, and as concerns the premature announcement of his own opinion to the court by Auditor Lotheisen, the War Commission will in its own time give the requisite instructions.

Testantibus Actis. On the 13th Dec. 1776, by the order

of the English General Grant, several regiments were entrusted to Col. von Donop's command, winter-quarters being assigned them in Trenton and its neighborhood. Thereupon Col. von Donop occupied the designated positions, and on the 14th Dec. 1776, Col. Rall entered Trenton with the hon. regiment of Alt-Lossberg, Knyphausen's and his own, with the artillery belonging thereto, with troopers and twenty English cavalry, making in all an effective force of about 1200 men. But instead of protecting his position by redoubts, as instructed by Col. von Donop in person, and afterwards through Captains Pauli and Martin, he only posted a few detachments and picket-guards. Even in Trenton he permitted the companies, with their entire equipments, to remain over night at the alarm-posts, and later each regiment in turn. On the 20th Dec. Col. Rall made a request of both Brigadier-General Leslie at Princeton, and Major-General Grant at Brunswick, that, on account of the distance between Trenton and Princeton, a detachment of 200 men should be stationed at Maidenhead, the enemy's position threatening to interrupt communication between the two places. He received in return the answer that this was unnecessary on account of the insignificant number and wretched condition of the enemy. Col. Rall, however, thinking this opinion of the state of affairs to be without foundation, strengthened the patrols in the vicinity of Princeton, whilst continuing to occupy Trenton. In the mean while several American officers in disguise presented themselves to him, and, under pretext of soliciting protection, spied out all his preparations. The 25th Dec., the day before the surprise, the main picket on the Pennington road was attacked and six men were wounded. Major von Dechow, prompted by this, advised Col. Rall to send the baggage to the Grenadiers. Col. Rall answered, "Fudge! these country clowns shall not beat us." Still he sent Lieutenant Wiederhold to strengthen the before mentioned pickets, and placed troops over night at the alarm-posts. Major von Dechow, on the other hand, who on 26th Dec. should have made his round two hours before day with two cannons and the needful forces, omitted this, not-

withstanding the anxiety which he had expressed the day previous, and Col. Rall likewise on the same morning slept until half-past seven o'clock, whilst the enemy and the picket to which Lieutenant Wiederhold had been sent were firing at each other. Brigade-Adjutant Lieutenant Biel, of the honorable regiment of Alt-Lossberg, reports that, between five and six o'clock and again at half-past seven, finding the Colonel sleeping, he hesitated to rouse him and announce the approach of the enemy. He arranged, however, in the mean while that forces from the main-guard should be sent to the picket. On his return he found the Colonel in his dressing-gown at the window, and to Colonel Rall's question, "What is the matter? What is the matter?" he replied, "Have you not heard the firing?" Whereupon the Colonel rejoined, "I will be there directly." Meanwhile upon the approach of four battalions of the enemy (the whole body amounting to from five to eight hundred men) Lieutenant Wiederhold withdrew under a steady fire, and waited before the town until the regiment marched out. As the enemy had by this time with their cannon and howitzers gained the heights of Trenton, Englehard and Fischer, lieutenants of the artillery, directed their cannon sharply upon them; but the loss of eight gunners and five draft-horses prevented further use of the cannon, and the officers were compelled to retire. After the loss of the cannon Rall's regiment withdrew from the well-contested posts, yet with great hurry and disorder, through both the other regiments. While the Adjutant Ensign Kleinschmidt repaired this confusion as much as possible, Colonel Rall, with his own and the Lossberg regiment, attacked the town, already advantageously occupied by the enemy, covering his flank by Major von Dechow and the Knyphausen regiment. This regiment was thus obliged to separate itself from the others, and to march with the Lossberg cannon, of which, however, one piece was sunk in the morass, to the bridge, in order to hold it, but so much time was lost in endeavoring to recover the sunken piece, that before the regiments reached the bridge both ends of it were in the hands of the enemy. As Colonel Rall was

forced by the pressure of the opposing troops to give up Trenton, and in the conflict received a fatal wound, the command fell upon Lieutenant-Colonel Schaefer. He was truly disposed to fight his way through, with the Lossberg and Rall's regiment, reckoned in all 483 men, but the enemy's advantage, their dispositions, cannon-firing, and the state of his own ammunition, rendered useless by the heavy snows, compelled him to abandon this design and to lay down his arms. Major von Dechow then, with his intercepted Knypshausen regiment, reckoned at 276 men, wished to retreat through the water. But he received a severe wound and gave over his command to Captain von Biesenrodt, informing him that the other two regiments had been taken prisoners, and that he also with his regiment must surrender. Captain von Loewenstein, who brought him this order, failed to mention that in that neighborhood there was a place where the water was only knee-deep. Captain von Biesenrodt had no intention of surrendering as Major von Dechow advised, but resolved to retreat through the wood. But this plan was defeated by the occupation of the wood by the enemy, and he commanded that the creek be sounded, and that his regiment march through it, ordering an officer with 40 skirmishers to cover their retreat, himself taking the place of rear guard. But the accomplishment of this design was thwarted in its commencement by the urgency of the Stirling brigade, which had been warned by the display of a white handkerchief by Major von Dechow of the disadvantage of the regiment, and Captain von Biesenrodt was forced, though with favorable terms, to lay down his arms. From all this it follows that Colonel Rall, together with Major von Dechow, in many regards acted culpably, and laid the foundation for the misfortunes of the brigade. Therefore, all its surviving officers are, by the constituted court-martial, exempted from penalty. The War Commission finds that conformable to the facts, and agrees with it the more readily, because the members of the court, by their accurate knowledge of the localities, and of the accompanying circumstances of the case, are in the best condition to judge of its merits.

Moreover, the War Commission is of the opinion that what appears in the sentence in reference to its publication in the Gazettes, and the gracious permission to carry new colors, is not essential to it, but is simply a conferring of the greatest favor. Also, with regard to the errors noted in the examination and trial, as well as in regard to the extract from the reports containing the individual opinion of the auditor, and communicated to the court-martial before the casting of the votes, proper instructions will be given. And we ever remain, in deepest reverence,

Your Serene Highness's humblest, most truly obedient,
and most dutiful servants,

Signed.

BARDELEBEN, SCHLIEFFEN,
W. HEIKENNITZ, JUNG KENN,
WANGERMANN,
SCHRAMM.

CASSEL, 15 April, 1782.